

## Insight of Eli and Isaac

(RH Day 2)

Rosh Hashanah is a joyous occasion. In ordinary times we pray together in our sanctuary. We revel in the joys of family and friends and food. We celebrate the beginning of a new year and the excitement of beginning anew. But before we can celebrate, we must earn that fresh start through introspection, repentance, and commitment to change. Today, on the first of the Ten Days of Awe, we are called upon to look inside ourselves and to reflect on the ways we have behaved over the past year. Are we proud of what we have done? Did we do the right thing? Did we do enough?

When we examine our lives in this way, we rely on our powers of insight. Thankfully, the rabbis chose readings for the two days of Rosh Hashanah to offer us guidance on how to achieve the necessary introspection. The Akeidah and the story of Hannah both feature characters who are literally blind, and whose blindness is a metaphor for the ways in which they do not understand themselves or others truthfully. As these characters struggle with their own lack of sight and insight, we can learn from their examples how to see ourselves and others more clearly.

The Haftarah portion we read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah narrates Hannah's impassioned prayers for a son. The opening verses describe Hannah as the much beloved wife of Elkanah who, despite her status as the favorite, is tortured by her own infertility. During the annual family trip to the Temple, Hannah goes off to pray by herself. She is so consumed with sorrow and so absorbed in her prayer that the Priest, Eli, mistakenly believes she is intoxicated.

Eli's error comes not from lack of sight, but from misinterpreting what he sees. When he notices Hannah's mouth moving but does not hear any sound, he judges her harshly. Instead of recognizing Hannah as a humble woman, consumed by sadness, he misinterprets her behavior as immoral and immodest. It is only when Hannah bravely explains herself that he understands her piety and blesses her.

Later in his life, Eli's lack of insight continues and his errors of perception affect Hannah's son, Samuel. Samuel is born as the result of Eli's blessing, and when he is old enough Hannah delivers him to the Temple to serve as Eli's assistant. Although Samuel is a pious and loyal servant, chaos reigns in the temple at Shiloh because of Eli's lack of oversight. Eli is technically in charge, but the narrative tells us that he is

mostly to be found “lying in his place. His eyes had begun to grow dim and he could not see.” Although the text describes Eli as literally blind, his physical inability to see is not what matters to the plot of this narrative. Rather, the Tanakh’s mention of his disability is meant to emphasize his refusal to examine what his sons are doing. And what they are doing is not good. The text tells us they take more than their fair share of sacrifices, and take advantage of women coming to make offerings. All in all, the text tells us, chaos reigned and “The word of God was not heard in those times.”

This last sentence is particularly interesting because it reminds us that our point of view is heavily influenced by what we see going on around us. Eli’s sons are corrupt, sure, but they and their father don’t pay much attention to it because they don’t have any counter example to show them the errors of their ways. This reference to their surroundings is a poignant reminder that we can only see what we are shown or taught to look for.

Eli is not entirely unaware of his sons’ misbehavior, and he chastises them for the gossip he hears about them, saying “Why do you do the likes of these things, for I hear evil reports about you, from all these people. No, my sons, for the rumor which I hear the Lord's people spreading, is not good.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 2:24

He seems more concerned with the fact that people are talking about his children, and not so interested in whether or not what they're saying is true. His choice of words also raises an interesting question: why does Eli need to rely on rumors that he hears from other people, when his sons are sinning right in front of him? It seems that although he **could** witness his sons' misbehavior firsthand, Eli focuses instead on hearsay in order to distance himself and maintain plausible deniability.

Of course, this path of denial does not succeed for long. Since Eli refuses to see, God connects with him by speaking through Samuel. One night, God calls out to Samuel in order to give him a prophecy about the future of Eli's priesthood.

Samuel was sleeping in the Temple of the Lord where the Ark of God was. The Lord called out to Samuel and he answered, "I'm coming." He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, you called me," but Eli replied "I didn't call you, go back to sleep. So he went back and lay down. Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" Samuel rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, you called me." But Eli replied, I didn't call my son. Go back to sleep..." The Lord called Samuel again, a third time, and he rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, you called me." Then **Eli**

understood that the Lord was calling the boy. And Eli said to Samuel, “Go lie down. If you are called again say, ‘Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening.’” And Samuel went to his place and lay down.”<sup>2</sup>

Although Samuel is the recipient of God’s call, it is Eli who first **understands the meaning of the mysterious voice.** How interesting that he can comprehend what Samuel hears, but not what he himself sees. Again, these physical capacities are meant to represent Eli’s emotional insight. This incident, in which Eli coaches Samuel through reception of God’s prophecy, reveals Eli’s true nature. He certainly **can** perceive and understand what is going on around him, and he recognizes God’s work in the world. But when it comes to his sons he chooses to look away.

When Samuel returns to tell him about God’s plan to punish Eli and his sons, Eli has a startling response. He says simply, “He is the Lord, May He do what is good in His eyes.”<sup>3</sup> Here, Eli finally concedes the power of Divine vision and insight because he knows that his own insight has not been sufficient. His moment of reckoning can push us to ask ourselves: what are we currently unable or unwilling to acknowledge? What kinds of

---

<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 3:4-9

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 3:18

hints does the world give us about what we are currently looking away from, and how can we bring ourselves to greater understanding before, like Eli, it is too late? He is complacent for far too long, and when he finally does come around, the only option available to him is fatalism. His story is part of our High Holy Day liturgy to encourage us to learn from his mistake, and more closely examine the harsh truths in our own lives before it is too late.

A parallel story exists in the Torah portion we read today on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the binding of Isaac. God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham is ready to comply until the very last moment, when an angel stops his hand and Abraham sacrifices a ram instead. This episode is the defining moment of Isaac's young life, and its ramifications define his adulthood. Like Eli, Isaac also grows blind as he ages. Although Isaac's literal blindness is germane to his narrative, I would like to argue it is also, and perhaps, more importantly, a device the Torah uses to teach about his powers of insight.

There is plenty of support for this theory in the Midrash, the rabbinic tales and interpretations. Several midrashim and commentaries offer

guesses about what caused Isaac's blindness, and these ideas fall into three main categories.<sup>4</sup>

First, two midrashim offer commentaries about how the actual episode of the Akeidah affected Isaac's sight. One suggests that as the angels looked down on Isaac bound on the altar, they wept and their tears fell into his eyes to prevent him from witnessing what his father would do. As a result, he was unable to see clearly from that moment on. Another interpretation suggests that his eyes were wide open at the moment of the sacrifice, and that what he saw was so traumatic that it forever damaged his vision. Both of these interpretations are clearly discussing his physical capacities as a way to make sense of how trauma affects mental and emotional health. This violent trial permanently affects Isaac's outlook. He is forever jaded, quick to see the worst in people and to ignore anything that might challenge his assumptions.

A second set of midrashim suggest that in his old age Isaac is unable to truly understand his sons because of his deep anger. His eldest son, Esau, has married several Canaanite women who offer sacrifices to idols rather than worshipping God. Literally, the smoke from their sacrifice gets

---

<sup>4</sup> Avivia Zornberg *The Beginning of Desire* 155

in his eyes. Their smoke also clouds his powers of introspection, because he is so consumed by anger at his son's marital choices that he cannot focus on anything else. He doesn't consider the way his choice of favorites puts undue pressure on Esau and deprives Jacob of affection. He doesn't assume responsibility for the choices his sons make as they mature or for his own inaction in securing his legacy. His anger keeps him focused on what he considers to be Esau's big mistake, and this singular focus keeps him from any helpful action.

Finally, some midrashim suggest he is simply blind because of his age. He has grown old and his sight is naturally poor. He is stuck in the past, set in his expectations of his sons and in his own particular ways of thinking. For their part, Jacob and Esau are consumed by their own youth and arrogance.

All three of these interpretations of the causes of Isaac's troubles offer us insight about our own "blind spots." Many of us have experiences with trauma, anger, and age that justifiably affect the way we think about each other and about the world. We are too afraid or traumatized to let go of the past. Too angry to listen. Too stubborn to consider alternatives. When we hear Isaac's story on the High Holy Days we have the opportunity to learn



from his experiences and to achieve the resolution he does not. We are sympathetic to Isaac's plight, understanding of how his traumatic childhood, his disappointment in his sons, and his end of life despair cause him so much distress. At the same time, we are heartbroken to see how he lets these challenges overtake him, and how his inaction sets his sons up to repeat his mistakes. This sadness for Isaac should encourage us to avoid the same pitfalls in our own lives, to combat our inclination to let our past stand in our way.

The narratives from Eli and from Isaac remind us of the important questions we need to ask ourselves during these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe. What flaws and faults do we know about, but refuse to confront? How can we critically examine our biases in order to understand ourselves and one another more clearly and compassionately?

Eli finally learns to do this work with the help of God and a trusted assistant. Although we are not likely to receive direct prophecy in the next ten days, we experience God's work in the world around us every day and it is up to us to find new ways to listen as we prepare for this new year. We can listen more closely to our own inner voices by setting aside time to quietly reflect, journal, or meditate. We can listen more closely to the divine

voice by noticing and appreciating small miracles. And we can listen to the voices of those who love and trust us most, even if that means engaging in difficult conversations. When we take note of ourselves, our surroundings, and our loved ones, we can find many great sources of spiritual insight, if we are willing to truly listen.

This work is not easy. Two of our greatest ancestors struggled to complete it successfully. We read the stories of Eli and Isaac on Rosh Hashanah not to discourage us, but to show us that it is ok for us to have a hard time. We see that insight and introspection don't just magically come to us, even to these two prophets with direct connections to God. But their stories also remind us of the dangers of not working for change. **Eli and Isaac are both bitter at the end, and their narratives remind us to take this opportunity we have right now, in the next ten days, to do the difficult work of opening our eyes, our minds, and our hearts, to change.**